

Paradox, Power and Positionality: Contradictions in Research on Sustainable Academic Careers

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This essay examines five paradoxes shaping academic life for disabled scholars: recognition without redistribution, visibility and exposure, meritocracy and structural privilege, resilience and rest, and autonomy and interdependence. Drawing on my lived experience as a neurodivergent, home-based researcher navigating chronic illness and framed by sustainable career ecosystem theory, I show how these paradoxes expose enduring gaps between inclusive rhetoric and everyday academic practice. The escalating financial crisis in higher education across Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States further reveals the fragility of accessibility gains and growing precarity in academic employment. Using paradox as both lens and method, this essay demonstrates how disabled scholars' experiences spotlight systemic vulnerabilities and argues that structural redesign, rather than individual accommodation, is essential for equitable academic futures.

Keywords: disability; accessibility; sustainable careers; higher education; paradox; inclusion; ableism

Introduction

The financial crisis in higher education across Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) is reshaping conditions for disabled academics. In the UK, the Office for Students (2025) projects that under a 'no growth' scenario, 62% of English providers could face deficits by 2027-28, with sector-wide income reductions exceeding £3 billion. In 2025 alone, UK universities cut 15,000 jobs (University and College Union 2025) and closed nearly 4,000 courses (Jack 2025). Fixed-term contracts, short-term grants, and increasing precarity exacerbate structural inequities (Ma 2024). Since 2022, many conferences have withdrawn online or hybrid options, citing financial pressures, undermining accessibility gains from the COVID-19

pandemic (Donald 2025a) and contradicting inclusive rhetoric in conference themes (Paul Vincent, Soltani, and McAteer 2026).

Despite inclusive rhetoric, structural inequities continue to shape disabled scholars' academic careers. This essay explores five paradoxes shaping these experiences. Grounded in autoethnographic reflection, it positions lived experience as a valid standpoint to reveal systemic inequalities. While situated in the context of academia in the UK, the systemic factors highlighted are relevant internationally (Martin 2021). Sustainable career ecosystem theory (Donald, Van der Heijden, and Baruch 2024) underpins the discussion, capturing the interplay of personal, contextual, and temporal dimensions and the interdependence among scholars, colleagues, and institutions.

Five Paradoxes Shaping Academic Life for Disabled Scholars

Paradox 1: Recognition without redistribution

Universities often celebrate inclusion through awards or campaigns, allowing them to appear virtuous while minimal resources and power are redistributed. Neurodivergent and disabled individuals may feel unable to challenge ableist norms (Jentjens, Georgiadou, and Hennekam 2025). Genuine equity requires structural changes: secure contracts, funded adjustments, protected rest, and redesigned workloads accommodating fluctuating capacity (Madikizela-Madiya and Mkhwanazi 2025). Scholars on adjunct or precarious contracts rely on institutional resources for research and networking, making the lack of redistribution particularly harmful.

Institutions may argue that budgetary constraints make full redistribution unfeasible. However, small measures, such as guaranteed flexible workloads or equitable access to research support, can meaningfully reduce inequities.

Recognition initiatives must be coupled with tangible resource allocation to avoid performative ableism and translate recognition into real equity.

Paradox 2: Visibility and exposure

Publicly discussing disability can challenge institutional denial (Donald and Yarovaya 2023). Writing about being unable to leave my home fosters visibility and connection with other disabled researchers and advocacy networks beyond local or national borders. However, visibility carries risks: disclosure invites scrutiny and evaluation against able-bodied norms and can leave people feeling judged. Disabled scholars repeatedly explain their needs, which can be exhausting, while also managing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. Informal power dynamics (e.g., confidence, discourse familiarity, and network position) determine whose contributions are recognised and whose remain marginal (King, Griffin, and Bell 2023). Scholars with less social capital or new to academia face barriers.

While avoiding disclosure may protect scholars from discrimination, invisibility can perpetuate isolation and systemic neglect of accessibility. Institutions should normalise and value visibility without overburdening individuals, for instance by institutionalising mentorship networks, distributing advocacy work, and providing safe channels for disclosure.

Paradox 3: Meritocracy and structural privilege

The ideal of equal opportunity persists, yet career progression depends on networking, conferences, publications, and collaboration. Precarity amplifies inequities, disadvantaging scholars with fluctuating health, caregiving responsibilities, or limited resources (Paul Vincent and Donald 2024).

Meritocracy (un)intentionally frames structural barriers as personal failings.

Traditional metrics (e.g., grants, publications, and conference presentations) privilege those with stable health and social capital while neglecting relational and variable productivity, embedding assumptions that work is a norm rather than a right (Donald 2025b, Baeken, Forrier, and De Cuyper 2025). Valuing interdependent work recognises that sustainable careers rely on sustained systemic support, not solely individual agency (De Vos, Van der Heijden, and Akkermans 2020).

Defenders of meritocracy may argue that standardised metrics ensure fairness. Yet such metrics cannot account for unequal starting points or systemic barriers. Career evaluations should incorporate contextualised achievements, relational contributions, and adaptive capacity, recognising collaborative and intermittent productivity as equally valid forms of scholarly excellence.

Paradox 4: Resilience and rest

Resilience discourse often valorises endurance, whereby toxic positivity risks framing exhaustion as commitment (Donald and Healy 2025). Disabled academics are expected to adapt rather than challenge systemic strain. Yet sustainable careers require structural support. Conferences and institutional expectations often ignore Deaf and disabled scholars' needs (Paul Vincent, Soltani, and McAteer 2026). In a sustainable career ecosystem, rest is a structural imperative supporting long-term participation. Embedding rest as shared responsibility challenges the framing of resilience as an individual virtue (McCalmon, Ugiagbe-Green, and Mohammed-Chapman 2026). Precarity intensifies strain, leaving little room to resist overwork (Ma 2024).

Some argue that resilience fosters personal growth, and this can of course be the case. However, valorising endurance over systemic reform shifts the

burden of adaptation onto individuals rather than addressing structural causes of strain. With job cuts across the higher education sector, similarities could be drawn to constructive dismissal through attrition of those unable to continually take on more work. Institutions must normalise rest through workload caps, mandatory breaks, and flexible deadlines, embedding recuperation into the design of academic work.

Paradox 5: Autonomy and interdependence

Academic work is often portrayed as autonomous, yet it relies on interdependence: colleagues, administrative support, and institutional flexibility (Martin 2021). Non-disabled dependencies remain invisible. Institutions reward independence while overlooking enabling structures. Recognising interdependence reframes competence as collective, challenging neoliberal ideals. Informal hierarchies determine whose autonomy is acknowledged (King, Griffin, and Bell 2023). Digital tools (e.g., hybrid teaching, online collaboration, virtual conferences) can expand participation when implemented thoughtfully. Yet sustainable digital work requires temporal equity and acknowledgement that constant connectivity compromises inclusion. Flexible scheduling highlights the need for structural equity (Jentjens, Georgiadou, and Hennekam 2025).

Autonomy is often praised for fostering innovation. However, ignoring interdependence risks over emphasising individual agency and productivity while downplaying the influence of external factors and the need for enabling structures. Universities should recognise interdependent work by acknowledging

collaborative contributions in promotion criteria, providing dedicated administrative support, and designing accessible digital infrastructures.

Understanding Paradox as Method

Paradoxes reveal how institutions operate. Universities rely on the tension between inclusive rhetoric and exclusive practice to maintain structures (Donald 2025a).

Contradiction is foundational rather than incidental. Sustainable career ecosystem theory (Donald, Van der Heijden, and Baruch 2024) clarifies the interaction between individual agency and structural forces, recognising the interrelation of person, context, and time (Baruch 2015, De Vos, Van der Heijden, and Akkermans 2020).

The experiences of disabled scholars elucidate contradictions that affect all academics: promoting resilience while producing burnout, encouraging flexibility while enforcing presence, and valuing inclusion without redistribution. Systemic change is essential; responsibility for transformation cannot rest solely with marginalised individuals if they are to have the opportunity to demonstrate their strengths and thrive (Donald, Cook, and Mohandas 2025). My positionality as a home-based researcher captures how knowledge circulation depends on mobility and embodiment, often excluding me from valuable spaces of knowledge exchange and forcing me to create alternative opportunities for networking and knowledge dissemination (e.g., through LinkedIn). Reflexivity situates personal experience as analytically productive while maintaining attention to context and temporality (see career sustainability via person-career fit dynamics, Talluri et al. 2025).

Conclusion

Paradoxes persist through (un)intentional institutional design rather than through premeditated or intentional neglect. Academic employment extracts maximum labour from bodies presumed endlessly productive. Disabled scholars' presence

exposes these assumptions, revealing exclusion as structural. Yet paradox generates possibilities. Sustainable careers depend on interdependence, rest, and collective well-being. Practices developed by disabled scholars model strategies essential for a sustainable academy. Universities must decide whether to redesign systems to enable diverse participation or continue marginalising underrepresented groups and extracting unsustainable labour. While grounded in the context of academia in the UK, these paradoxes and strategies resonate internationally, offering guidance for sustainable and inclusive career design globally. Universities worldwide must actively engage with these paradoxes, recognising that inclusive policy alone is insufficient. Structural redesign, informed by disabled scholars' lived experiences (and those of other historically marginalised groups, with particular emphasis on intersectionality), offers a pathway to sustainable and equitable careers. By embedding interdependence, rest, and adaptive evaluation into institutional practices, higher education can shift from extracting unsustainable labour toward fostering resilience, innovation, and diversity. These strategies provide a model not only for UK academia but for a global, scholarly, inclusive, and sustainable career ecosystem.

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